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A Qualitative Study of the Experiences of First-Generation Peer Mentors

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science in Occupational Therapy

School of Health and Natural Sciences

Dominican University of California

San Rafael, CA

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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidates' thesis advisor and approved by the Chair of the Masters program, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the Occupational Therapy Department in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Occupational Therapy. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidates alone.

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Abstract

While there are numerous studies reporting on the benefits that mentees receive from peer mentoring, there is limited research on the benefits to mentors, particularly first-generation students (FGS). The purpose of this study was to examine the experience of mentoring from the FGS mentors' point of view. In this qualitative, exploratory design, four FGS mentors were interviewed about their experiences with a peer-mentoring program at their university. The participants believed they developed skills in the areas of time management, communication, and setting boundaries. The participants learned about themselves and gained an understanding of how the skills they developed while mentoring will help with the transition out of college and transfer into the workforce.

Introduction

Transitioning from high school to college and college to career is challenging for first-generation students (FGS). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported in 2010 that almost 50% of the population within higher education are (FGS). A first-generation student is “a student who is the first in their families to attend a post-secondary educational institution and whose parents did not obtain a college degree” (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, p. 404, 2007). In 1998, NCES reported about 43% of college students were first-generation. In 2011, the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA reported the percentage of FGS who graduated from college was 64% within 4 years at a private university, 37% within 4 years at a public university, 78% within 6 years at a private university, and below 66% within 6 years at a public university. Upon entering the workforce after college, FGS encounter uncertainty, feel less prepared for the future, and must address changes in social support (Eisner, 2010; Wood, 2004; Yazedjian, Kielaszek, & Toews, 2010). In today’s economy, having a college degree is an advantage when competing for higher-wage jobs that provide greater economic security (Hirudayaraj, 2011). Encouraging FGS to pursue a higher education may open up doors to these higher paying jobs and professional careers (Hirudayaraj, 2011).

FGS often are less informed about the process and preparation for college, lack family support, may have a lower socioeconomic status, and may have difficulties with social integration into college (Barry, Hudley, Su-Je, & Kelly, 2008; Garcia, 2010; Jehangir, 2010; McGhie, 2009; Woosley & Shepler, 2011).

These factors can lead to negative outcomes such as stress, depression and anxiety, poor academic performance, and social isolation (Lehmann, 2007; McGhie, 2009; Stebleton & Soria, 2012; Wang & Castaneda-Sound, 2008).

Occupational therapists can help FGS through peer mentor programs participate in meaningful and purposeful activities to increase college success. Peer mentoring is defined as peer education where the mentor, who is a more experienced student in college and serves as a role model, offers support and guidance to a mentee, who is a less experienced peer freshman student in college (Harmon, 2006; Phinney, Torres-Campos, Padilla-Kallemeyn, & Kim, 2011). A peer-mentoring program can be a beneficial resource for FGS to utilize in order to decrease or prevent negative outcomes such as academic failure, or emotional distress (Barry, Hudley, Kelly, & Cho, 2009). Mentees have reported decreased depression and stress levels while receiving support and encouragement from a mentor (Barry et al, 2009; Phinney et al., 2011). Mentors also learn about themselves through mentoring and report having increased communication skills and better time management (Harmon, 2006). Several studies have been conducted on the effectiveness and benefits on first- generation mentees who join peer mentoring programs, but there is limited research about the benefits mentors gain from such participation.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand the experience of peer mentoring from the mentor's point of view, to gain a deeper perspective on the benefits of being a mentor, and to obtain their opinions about whether they believe skills gained in the program will carry over after college to their future professions.

To gain a better understanding of the experiences of peer mentors, FGS of junior or senior status were recruited from the Bridging the Gap for First-Generation College Students mentoring program at a small, private, liberal arts university in Northern California. FGS were interviewed individually and through the analysis of these interviews, five key themes emerged. The key themes were skills participants believed they developed, the mentor-mentee relationship, experiences participants had within the mentoring program, emotions the participants felt while developing mentoring relationships, and application of skills to future career. Each theme is discussed in the results section and is illustrated with selected quotes from the interviews.

Literature Review

When starting college, FGS face challenges personally, academically, and within their family. Being in a peer-mentoring program is beneficial to FGS (Barry et al., 2009). A peer mentoring program provides support in all aspects of university life for FGS (Lunsford, 2011; Power, Miles, Peruzzi, & Voerman, 2011; Putsche, Storrs, Lewis, & Haylett, 2008). This literature review will cover the transition of FGS into college, transition from college to career, and the research on benefits of peer mentoring.

Transition of First-Generation Students into College

The transition from high school to college is not an easy journey for FGS. Compared to non-first-generation students (NFGS), FGS find it more difficult to adjust to the demands of college. FGS experience multiple challenges when they begin college including personal, social, academic, and financial factor challenges (McGhie, 2009).

Personal factors such as knowledge of college, family support, cultural expectations, family obligations, and motivation and attitude toward college can influence a FGS's success in college (Barry et al., 2008; Jehangir, 2010; Phinney et al., 2011). Academic factors such as preparation for college in high school and college curriculum may affect an individual's choice to continue college (Garcia, 2010; McGhie, 2009; Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008). Financial factors including socioeconomic status and financial responsibilities can influence FGS's decision to attend and continue college (Coffman, 2011). Social factors, for example interacting with other college students or joining college activities, are often challenging for FGS (Woosley & Shepler, 2011). These multiple factors can result in stress, depression and anxiety, social isolation, and poor academic performance (Barry et al., 2009; Lehman, 2007; Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rourke, 2011; Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008).

Several personal factors also present obstacles for FGS in college. FGS lack knowledge and information about the process and preparation for college and are often unaware of the campus resources available at their college (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2012). Unlike FGS, NFGS are more likely to have college resources provided to them by their family to help support them through their college experience (Barry et al., 2008; Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2012; Jehangir, 2010). Many FGS are expected to fulfill family responsibilities, such as household chores or taking care of younger siblings, while attending college (Jehangir, 2010; Phinney et al., 2011). Despite the challenges they face, FGS are motivated to attend college because they want a brighter future for themselves (Jehangir, 2010).

This attitude of wanting to attend college often acts as a motivator for FGS to move out of their comfort zone and encourages them to be independent (Jehangir, 2010).

FGS are less academically prepared for college than NFGS. Not all FGS have the opportunity to attend a high school that provides programs, services or college preparatory courses that prepare high school students for college (Garcia, 2010). While some high schools offer preparation courses for standardized entrance exams for college, such as the SAT or ACT, fewer FGS have that option (Garcia, 2010). Additionally, the academic workload of college is different from the workload in high school, and students are expected to be self-directed learners to a greater degree than in high school. Studies suggest that FGS experience more difficulty with college academics compared to NFGS (Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008). In contrast to NFGS, FGS find the demands of college courses more strenuous than high school courses because of their lack of preparation in high school (McGhie, 2009).

Many FGS struggle to pay the expenses of college. The latest statistics of undergraduate students in 2007-2008 show some FGS are of lower socioeconomic status (20-30%), and attending college increases their financial obligations (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Low-income FGS find that not having enough money affects their opportunity to attend and continue college (Coffman, 2011). Some FGS begin college and realize that they do not have enough funds to continue pursuing their degree, so they become unable to continue with their college education (Garcia, 2010). FGS are often reluctant to take out student loans, so they need to work more hours to pay for college (Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguiman, & Miller, 2007). FGS also may lack knowledge and information about financial planning (Mehta et al., 2011).

Some FGS do not understand how to apply for financial aid or obtain financial assistance because their families have not experienced this process before. Finishing college is therefore more difficult due to a lack of funds for tuition and other college related costs (McGhie, 2009).

Social factors, such as the social environment and involvement in school events, change for FGS when they transition to college. Some FGS feel overwhelmed by the new environment and feel like they are going back and forth between two cultures (Woosley & Shepler, 2011). Many FGS find it challenging to transition into college from a high school environment because they feel more alienated than NFGS (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012). FGS may feel like outsiders and feel there are expectations to perform in a certain way, such as dressing in expensive clothes, speaking with a sophisticated vocabulary, and participating in student activities (Woosley & Shepler, 2011). Participating in student activities or interacting with other college students is difficult for FGS to do while also trying to balance academics, family and work responsibilities (Woosley & Shepler, 2011). FGS work more hours because of financial struggles, which results in lower levels of on-campus involvement and interaction with other students (Lundberg et al., 2007).

All of the factors that pose challenges for FGS can lead to negative outcomes such as stress, depression and anxiety, social isolation, and poor academic performance. Stress in college can result from academic workload or family responsibilities (Barry et al., 2009; Mehta et al., 2011; Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008). Studies of depression and anxiety in college students show FGS have higher levels compared to other students (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012; Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008).

Social isolation of FGS can occur because of not feeling like they fit in (Barry et al., 2009; Lehman, 2007). Poor academic performance appears to be more evident in FGS due to lack of college preparation in high school and lack of knowledge about college (Barry et al., 2009; McGhie, 2009; Mehta et al., 2011; Woosley & Shepler, 2011). Multiple challenges FGS encounter can affect their success in college and can lead to negative outcomes.

Stress can negatively influence FGS' success in college. Wang and Castañeda-Sound (2008) suggested that lack of support from family could lead to increased stress levels for FGS. FGS experience higher levels of stress and do not have the resources to cope with stress (Mehta et al., 2011). Compared to NFGS, the stress levels of FGS are higher as they struggle to balance their time between academic, family, and financial responsibilities (Barry et al., 2009; Mehta et al., 2011; Woosley & Shepler, 2011). Wang and Castañeda-Sound (2008) found academic difficulties in college affected the psychological well-being of FGS by increasing stress levels (Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008). McGhie (2009) stated that the financial challenges experienced by FGS could influence their ability to concentrate, understand, and apply their cognitive skills in their academic work.

The challenge of integrating into the college environment can lead to social isolation for FGS. Lehmann (2007) suggested that FGS feel isolated because students, with prior college knowledge, intimidate them. FGS are more socially isolated because they are unfamiliar with college and the demands of college are challenging (Lehmann, 2007).

FGS who feel left out socially find it difficult to reach out to anyone for help (Barry et al., 2009). Feelings of isolation are felt at college and at home for FGS because the family lacks knowledge about college (Engle, 2007).

FGS are also at a greater risk for depression and anxiety. FGS often feel overwhelmed or depressed due to academic, financial, and family responsibilities (Jenkins, Miyazaki, & Janosik, 2009). Wang and Castaneda-Sound (2008) found that some FGS experience more depressive symptoms because of academic challenges than NFGS. Academic challenges in college can cause some FGS to worry about falling behind in classes and wasting their money (Lehmann, 2007). In addition to academic challenges, some FGS struggle with being away from home. Some FGS may develop separation anxiety from leaving home and the comfort of a familiar surrounding when trying to adjust to college (Barry et al., 2009; Woosley & Shepler, 2011). In addition, some FGS begin to develop anxiety because of not being able to connect with family members who lack knowledge about college (Bryan & Simmons, 2009).

FGS are more likely to have lower grades and fail classes (McGhie, 2009). Some FGS become overwhelmed and perform poorly in their academics because the challenging courses in college can lead to academic failure (McGhie, 2009). Woosley and Shepler (2011) found that some FGS doubt their academic skills in college because of the curriculum difference between high school and college. Low grades and dropping out of college can also be a result of not having enough time for schoolwork due to family responsibilities and financial obligations (Barry, et. al., 2009; Mehta, et al., 2011; Woosley & Shepler, 2011).

Transition from College to Career

Not only do FGS have difficulties with the transition from high school to college, but FGS also face challenges in the transition from college to career. The challenges they face are uncertainty, a lack of preparation for the future, and a change of social supports (Eisner, 2010; Wood, 2004; Yazedjian, Kielaszek, & Toews, 2010). Twenty years ago graduates went into the job market and had a guarantee of an entry-level job, but today's graduates face a long-lasting recession and are competing with those who have been unemployed for years (Andrews, 2009; Willis & Schlussermann, 2010). Employers are more likely to hire experienced workers instead of new graduates because of cost expenses of new graduates (Owens, 2009). New graduates instead often settle on jobs that do not require a college degree and receive less pay than their educational value (Rampell, 2009). Graduates who are compensated less struggle financially and often move back home with their parents (Hansen, 2007).

One challenge new graduates face when finding an entry-level job is not being prepared with the skills that employers expect (Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008). New graduates often have deficits in communication skills, interpersonal skills, adaptability skills, and time management skills (Schoeff, 2007). New graduates also feel unprepared for the work world. As underclassmen in college, students feel prepared for the work world, but as graduation approaches this confidence decreases (Farner & Brown, 2008). Farner and Brown (2008) suggested that confidence decreases because students begin to realize the challenges of the work world and how unprepared they are.

To help with the realization of the challenges of the work world and the feeling of being unprepared, universities can offer counselors who understand the concerns of students and help them prepare for the challenges expected (Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008). Neill, Mulholland, Ross, and Leckey (2004) stated that students could gain career skills through part-time employment while in college. Many universities offer a career center on campus where students can find part time work, but students who need this resource often do not use it (Olson, 2010).

Another challenge new graduates face when transitioning into the workforce is the change in social supports. While in college, students receive constant feedback and the work is structured, but in the workforce, the feedback is less consistent. In addition, there are stricter deadlines and standards of work (Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008). New graduates have a hard time interacting with their coworkers because of isolation and differences in age and interests (Polach, 2004). Instead, new graduates often turn to their families for support (Murphy, Blustein, Bohlig, & Platt, 2010). Murphy et al. (2010) found that students who have family support often have a smoother transition and a greater sense of well-being in the transition from college to career.

Benefits of Peer Mentoring

A peer mentoring relationship involves the mentee and the mentor. This section describes the research on benefits for the mentee and mentor. Peer mentees experience decreased depression and stress when compared to students not mentored. Mentors affected the persistence and motivation of the mentees. The mentors also learn about themselves through the mentoring process in areas such as strengths and weaknesses.

Mentors also develop and improved communication skills and time management skills because of the mentoring process (Harmon, 2006).

Students who receive mentoring experience decreased depression (Barry et al., 2009; Phinney et al., 2011). Mentors help decrease depression in mentees by accepting the mentee, so the mentee does not feel as isolated (Barry et al., 2009). Phinney et al. (2011) described that mentored students had a decrease in depression from the fall to spring semester while non-mentored students had an increase in depression. Mentors also provided the mentees with a sense of belonging and friendship (Lunsford, 2011). Phinney et al. (2011) showed that mentees had an increased sense of belonging from the fall to the spring semester.

Students who are in a mentoring program also experience decreased stress (Barry et al., 2009; Phinney et al., 2001). Mentored students are less likely to feel alone while going through stressful times because the mentor understands what their mentee is going through. Mentees are able to talk to their mentors about the stress they are going through (Barry et al., 2009). Mentors are not judgmental, so the mentee feels comfortable talking to the mentor (Harmon, 2006).

Mentees who were able to talk about their feelings to someone who understands, experiences reduced stress (Phinney et al., 2011). Similar to the above reported results about depression Phinney et al. (2011), found that mentees reported stress levels decreased from fall to spring semesters, whereas non-mentored students had an increase in stress levels from fall to spring (Phinney et al., 2011). The mentors helped the mentees deal with stress and depression, and this can translate to improved performance in the classroom.

Mentors' support and encouragement can affect mentees' persistence and motivation in college. Mentoring positively influences the mentee to stay in college and graduate. The mentor can support the mentee and provide encouragement. According to Hu and Ma (2010), encouragement from the mentor translates to persistence by the mentee. Similarly, Phinney et al. (2011) found mentored students maintained academic motivation while non-mentored students declined in academic motivation from fall to spring. Individuals who maintain motivation and persistence are less likely to drop out of college. Therefore, the support and encouragement mentors provide to mentees may positively influence retention rates (Hu & Ma, 2010).

The mentoring experience also benefits mentors in multiple ways. The skills mentors gain or develop may help them in their career. Mentoring teaches the mentor about himself or herself (Harmon, 2006). Mentors have to identify their own strengths and weakness, so they can better help mentees identify their strengths and weaknesses (Harmon, 2006). Understanding strengths and weaknesses gives mentors a better understanding of who they are and how they learn best. After graduation, use of this knowledge is helpful in the workplace.

The relationship between the mentor and mentee is dependent on communication. In one study, students who were mentors reported gains in communication skills. In a study by Harmon (2006), mentors stated they had to understand how to interact with a diverse group of people with different personalities and how to communicate effectively with each mentee. Learning how to communicate effectively during mentoring will help the mentors when they have a career.

Another area the mentors improved in is time management (Harmon, 2006). Mentors have to learn how to manage their own schedule: such as attending classes, studying, mentoring meetings, and possibly working. Mentors also have to understand their time management skills in order to help teach the mentees the topic.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this thesis was to research the experience of mentoring from the first-generation mentors' point of view in order to gain greater perspective on the experience. The researchers answered the following questions with this study.

- 1.) What were the experiences of peer mentors who participated in a FGS peer mentoring program?
- 2.) What was the importance of participating in peer mentoring for the peer mentors?
- 3.) What skill development came from participating in first-generation peer mentoring?
- 4.) What structural aspects of the program did the participants have the most difficulty with?

Theoretical Framework: Person, Environment, Occupation

The Person, Environment, Occupation (PEO) model was developed in the early 1990's by Mary Law and colleagues to understand "occupational performance from an ecological point of view" (Law & Dunbar, 2007, p. 28). In this model the person, environment, and occupation interact with one another and the results of the interaction are occupational performance (Law, Cooper, Strong, Stewart, Rigby, & Letts, 1996). Occupational performance is based on how well the person, environment, occupation interact.

There are many aspects to a person, and the PEO model takes holistic approach to understanding the person (Law et al., 1996). According to PEO, a person is unique and fulfills various roles at the same time (Law et al., 1996). The different elements of the person such as his or her “physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual characteristics” (Law & Dunbar 2007, p. 30) are part of who the person is. People’s life experiences also shapes who they are (Law et al., 1996). People’s roles change according to their contexts they are in. The role also changes over time. For example, a college student is a student in the classroom, classmate, a friend, mentor. At home the student is a child and sibling.

The environment is the setting in which the occupation takes place. The environment is anything external to the person that causes a response (Law & Dunbar, 2007). An environment can be physical as well as “social, political, economic, cultural, institutional” (Law & Dunbar, 2007, p. 30). At a college there are many environments where occupations take place. The classrooms, library, cafeteria, dorms, and gym are all physical environments at a college. Classmates and the student body are the social environment. A person’s behavior can be effected by the environment (Law & Dunbar, 2007). For example, during an exam everyone in the classroom tries to be as quiet as possible, as opposed to being noisy in the cafeteria because it is a place to socialize and eat.

Occupation is any self-directed meaningful and purposeful activity a person participates in over a lifetime (Law et al., 1996). Occupations meet the intrinsic needs of the person for “self-maintenance, expression, and fulfillment” (Law et al., 1996, p. 175). Students engage in occupations of studying, completing assignments, and socializing with friends.

The relationships between the person-occupation (P-O), occupation-environment (O-E), the person-environment (P-E), and person-environment-occupation (P-E-O) result in occupational performance. P-O interaction depends on how well the person can meet the demands of the occupation (Broome, McKenna, Flemming & Worrall, 2009). During a lecture, the student has to listen to the lecture, process the information, and take notes. How well the student is able to fulfill the environmental demands of being a student will determine the P-E fit. Some students may perform better in classes that have fewer students enrolled in the class. If the student attends a college with small class sizes, the student will likely perform better than if they were in a larger class. The environment sets up the demands of the occupation in the O-E interaction (Broome et al., 2009). It is harder to pay attention and take notes sitting in the back of a large classroom than sitting in the front of the classroom. The demands will be greater for the person sitting in the back since they will have more distractions to ignore. Optimal occupational performance is dependent on the interactions of P-O, O-E, P-E, and P-E-O; the better the relationship between the four the better the occupational performance will be.

The PEO model guided this research exploring the experience of first-generation mentors. By analyzing each element of PEO for the mentors, the researchers understood how the interactions of the PEO resulted in their performance. The person is the mentor and includes the experiences, role, identity, and skills of a mentor. Mentors have a social environment that includes the mentee, the relationship with the mentee, and social support the mentor has. Environmental supports may include resources the school provides for the students to transition out of college (job placement, counseling about graduate school, etc.). Mentoring is the occupation.

Occupational performance in this research was the mentor's performance in school and the mentor's preparation for transition out of college. Through data analysis, the researchers examined skills the mentors felt they gained and how they felt mentoring will help them in the future. The PEO model also guided the interview questions. The questions during the interview focused on the occupational performance of being a mentor (See Appendix A).

Figure 1: PEO Model to Guide Research

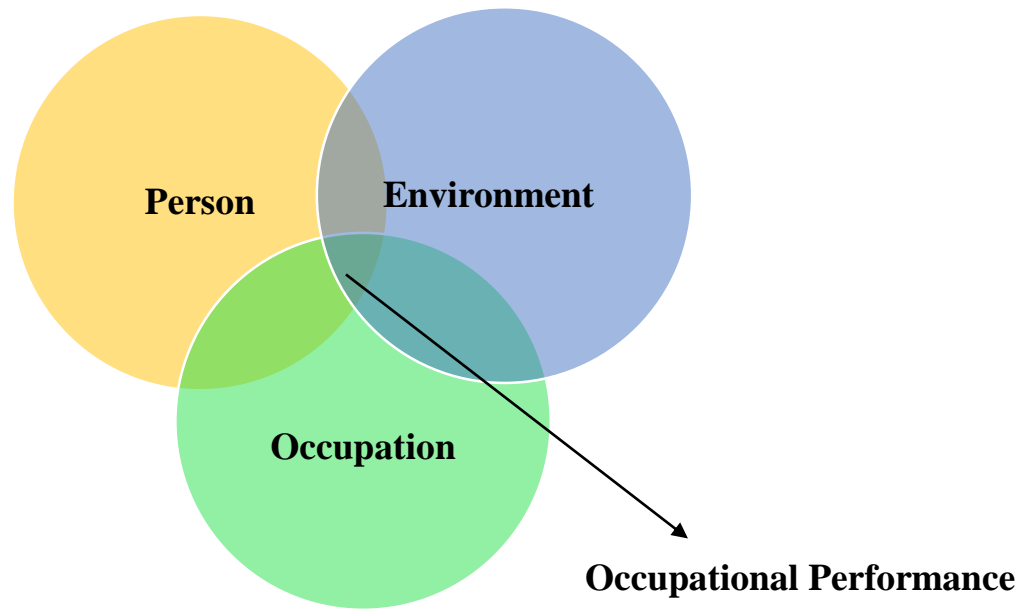


Figure 1 is the model used to guide the research.

Methodology

Research Design

This study used a qualitative, exploratory research design. Interviews were the method used to collect the data that was analyzed to answer the research questions. Qualitative research was appropriate to use for this project because little is known about FGS peer mentor experiences. Interviews can be used to collect information on individual's beliefs, thoughts, attitudes, and knowledge on a specific topic (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008). The interview process allowed researchers to understand similarities and differences between mentors' beliefs, thoughts, attitudes, and knowledge about the experience and benefits of mentoring. The same researcher conducted all interviews in order to ensure a more consistent process. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by all three researchers and then analyzed to discover common themes.

Participants

Study participants were student mentors at Dominican University of California who were involved in the Bridging the Gap for First-Generation College Students mentoring program in the 2012-2013 school year. All student mentors were of junior or senior status and were FGS. To recruit participants we used direct access via email to all eight peer mentors from Dominican University of California's Bridging the Gap for First-Generation College Students mentoring program. We also attended the monthly program meeting and asked the mentors if they would like to be involved in the study. At the end of recruitment, four mentors agreed to participate.

Dominican University of California is a private university located in San Rafael, CA with an enrollment of 2,278 students (Dominican University of California, 2012). The average class size is 16 students and the student to faculty ratio is 11:1. The percentage of female students is 75%, and 39% of students come from African-American, Hispanic, Asian-American, or Native-American backgrounds (ALANA). Of the total university enrollment, 29% are FGS and 10% of students come from low- or very low-income families (Dominican University of California, 2012).

Ethical and Legal Considerations

An application (#10114) was submitted by Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) to ensure that the rights and welfare of the participants recruited for this study would be protected. IRBPHS approved this research project (see Appendix B). IRBPHS assures that the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice were maintained throughout the study. Respects for persons ensures that the individual is respected as an autonomous being, participating in the study was voluntary, and participants were protected from any risk of harm. Beneficence ensures maximization of benefits and reduces risk of possible harm to the participants. Justice ensures that all participants in the study are treated equally and benefits are distributed equally between participants (Dominican University of California, 2006).

Participants were given a letter of informed consent that stated the purpose, procedure, risks and benefits of the study, and informed the participants that they had the right to withdraw from the study (see Appendix C).

Participants all received the same letter of consent, went through the same interview process, and were all audiotaped during the interview process.

In addition to the ethical principles stated in the IRBPHS, the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) Occupational Therapy Code of Ethics and Ethics Standards (2010) also address the ethical concerns of occupational therapy practice and research. AOTA Ethical principles addressed in this study were beneficence, nonmaleficence, confidentiality, and autonomy. Beneficence is the same ethical principle stated in the IRBPHS and ensured the well-being and safety of the participants. Nonmaleficence also ensured there were no issues of potential harm to the participants during this project.

The application submitted to the Dominican University of California IRBPHS determined that this study did not cause any harm to the participants. Autonomy and confidentiality ensured the names and identifying information of the participants were kept confidential. A coding system was used to keep the data and any information about the participants confidential and was stored in a locked cabinet in an office. Only the student researchers and the supervising faculty member were allowed to see any information.

Through the IRBPHS and AOTA occupational therapy code of ethics, there was assurance that all ethical principles were maintained and adhered to during this study. The rights of the participants were protected and all were treated equally. Participants were aware of the study they participated in via a letter of informed consent and had the right to withdraw from the study.

Researchers in this study conformed to the ethical principles stated above while promoting and maintaining the high standards of conduct within occupational therapy.

Procedures

The researchers conducted semi-structured one-on-one interviews to collect data. Each participant also provided demographic details such as gender, age, and major. The interview questions focused on why the participant chose to be involved in the program, what the participant expected to learn from the experience, what was learned from the experience, especially focusing on personal factors, and how mentoring has changed them (Harmon, 2006). (See Appendix A for interview guide). The interviewer asked participants questions about their reasons for mentoring, experience with the mentoring program, skills developed as a mentor, and how mentoring has influenced their life.

The participants signed consent forms to participate in the study. All interview questions were asked following the structure provided in the interview guide (Appendix A). The interviews were audio recorded and took place at a convenient location for the participant. The researcher also took notes during the interview to identify issues that needed additional exploration. Each interview was transcribed verbatim using a computer and transcription software.

Data Analysis

Analysis of data was done through the processes of coding and content analysis (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). The researchers read each transcription and made notes based on the content gathered from the interviews. Coding of the individual interviews was used to create a list of themes.

The PEO framework allowed for organization of themes into concepts. The concepts specifically looked were the personal experiences, roles, identity, and skills of the participants, the environmental contexts, and supports of the participants, and the occupational performance of the participants during college and in transitioning from college to work.

When analyzing data from one-on-one interviews there were challenges of how to ensure the analysis was trustworthy. To ensure that the data were trustworthy, triangulation of the data took place. Each researcher read and coded all four interviews. The researchers then discussed common themes and an agreement was made about which themes would be the focus of the study. Portney and Watkins (2009) state “triangulation is the process of confirming concepts using more than one source of data, more than one data collection method, or more than one set of researchers” (p. 312). Investigator triangulation was utilized in this study. Investigator triangulation is the use of more than one researcher to interpret data (Portney & Watkins, 2009).

Results

Eight junior and senior students from the Bridging the Gap for First-Generation College Students Mentoring Program who served as mentors were invited to participate in this qualitative study. Of the eight, four mentors agreed to be interviewed and participated in our study. Due to the small number of mentor participants so demographic information cannot be presented, but it can be stated that a variety of majors were represented and that the same male-female gender ratio of mentors in the program was represented in the study sample.

The participants chose to participate in the Bridging the Gap for First-Generation College Students Mentoring Program for a variety of reasons. All four participants stated, “wanting to make a difference in someone’s life as the primary reason” for joining the peer mentoring program. Two of the participants wanted to help other students transition into the college life because they had a hard time doing so themselves. Participant 3 previously had a mentor and stated, “It’s nice having a mentor because they can give advice that others may not have, so I want to do the same.”

Through the analysis of the interviews, five key themes emerged. The key themes were skills the participants believed they developed, experiences the participants had with the program, relationship between the mentor and mentee, emotions the participants felt while developing mentoring relationships, and application of skills to future professional careers. Each theme is discussed in the following sections and is illustrated with selected quotes from the interviews.

Skills developed through peer mentoring

Participants believed the skills in the mentoring program can carry forward into their future professions. The participants acquired various skills that they shared and advised their mentees on such as time management, active listening, interpersonal communication, and emotional self-regulation. Participant 2 commented, “In college, we’re developing specific skill sets and mindsets to gear us into our career.” The mentoring experience has helped the participants grow as individuals by giving the participants an opportunity to develop and apply their skills.

Time management is a skill all participants were able to improve while in the mentoring program. Participant 1 was able to work with the mentees’ schedules.

Participant 1 stated:

Not only am I taking into consideration my own schedule for school, work and other things I have to take care of, but I have 3 mentees who are of different majors... and all of our schedules kind of conflict so I am always making sure that we have some sort of time block in order to meet with each other.

Participant 2 used “trial and error” to find a schedule that incorporated “time for studying, taking breaks, getting enough sleep, time for laundry, and other things.”

Participant 2 also mentioned, “After working on that schedule for a couple weeks I had a better idea that laundry will take maybe an hour or 3 hours and studying is going to take 3-4 instead of 5-6.” Participant 3 kept self-organized with “a calendar... a planner... to make time for friends” and to balance school, tutoring, and internships. Participant 4 mentioned that time management is a skill that will be useful after graduating from Dominican University of California and wanted to emphasize that to the mentees.

Participant 4 had to manage time by incorporating school, work, and meeting with the mentees. Participant 4 commented, “I’m really trying to tap into my time management skills, to try and put together a study plan and organize everything I need, I have to really set time aside on top of everything else I’m currently doing.”

Communication and listening are skills that all four mentors were able to develop further in the mentoring program. Participant 1 learned how to improve and develop interpersonal skills by meeting and talking to younger students in order to build rapport. Participant 1 had to learn about not crossing personal boundaries when talking to mentees by “knowing the fine line between the personal aspect and the more professional.”

Participant 2 was able to develop “therapeutic communication” and “be like a confidant for a student that needs someone who has issues or problems they want to express.”

Participant 3 commented, “Listening skills have developed just because not everyone has the same story, but once you listen, you can relate to some stuff and give advice.”

Participant 4 learned to have a welcoming and inviting personality to communicate with others, especially the mentees. Participant 4 was able to develop communication and listening skills by building rapport with the mentees. Participant 4 mentioned, “I was able to further develop my communication and listening skills, specifically listening skills, and I feel that is something that you have to continuously work on.”

The participants each also developed different set of skills while in the mentoring program. Participants acquired new skills such as patience, leadership, maturity, responsibility, self-awareness, and finding resources. Participant 1 developed patience and commented, “I learned that I have a lot more patience than I expected. I was able to sit there and sit back... because I am usually on the go, ready to go on my toes, just ready.” Participant 2 saw a lot of development in maturity. Participant 2 mentioned becoming “more responsible for own money management and time management. Things on top of things that we kind of neglected because maybe our parents took care of it for us, like meals and transportation.” Participant 3 further developed independence by “finding different resources” and “learned more about keeping true to self.” Participant 4 learned to take initiative and commented, “I realized that I had to take initiative and kind of come to her rather than her come to me.”

Experiences with the Program

The experiences with the program theme emerged throughout all of the interviews and was subdivided into structural aspects of the program and expectations of the program. Structural aspects of the program involved the participants' opinions of how the program could be changed for a better experience, what they wanted from the program, and how the program actually was.

Changes suggested by the participants included matching by major, having set times to meet, and having a more facilitated program. Participant 1 commented, "The difference in majors from mine made scheduling to meet hard".

Scheduling to meet with mentees was difficult for Participant 2:

Some of the mentees commuted and I commuted, so I wasn't able to make some of the meetings and when I did make the meetings my mentees weren't always there so, I feel if we could coordinate those meetings with the schedules we would have better development and progress in the program.

Participant 3 expected more facilitation from the program not a do on your own:

I expected it to be a lot more, I don't know, I think I expected it to be a lot more, ah facilitated. Rather then, hey here's some people, go talk to them. Maybe for awhile I just waited for something to happen, so that I could go tell them and you know we'd all meet up. I didn't think it was going to be like hey here's three kids, you go email them yourself.

More facilitation from the program also affected Participant's 4 experience, "It would be nice if somehow we can facilitate more meetings between the mentees and mentors that ... are a little bit more structured."

The expectations of the program that the participants had also influenced the experience of the program. The participants wanted more meetings and more training with their mentoring experience. Participant 2 stated, “I think the coordinators of the program should have arranged more get togethers because then sharing and support between mentors and mentees would be stronger.”

The interaction between mentors and mentees was more educational and not fun, as Participant 1 stated:

I was kind of hoping to have little gatherings of all the mentors and mentees that weren't purely based on educational skills, but something more fun like bowling or a social event so we could all meet each other. There was no fun interactive event going on.

The training aspect of the program was not well planned out and could have been improved, as stated by Participant 4, “The training manual addressed things, but I feel like maybe it could have a little bit more, specifically in that area with knowing where you put the boundaries, where you draw the line”. Participant 3 also felt that training in courtesy of responding to emails and phone calls is necessary, “Business skills of answering and responding and emailing are different between freshmen, so I knew they just needed to be told when to respond by”.

Mentor-Mentee Relationship

Another theme that emerged was reflection on the mentor mentee relationship. Each participant had a different experience however there were common themes.

Participant 1 experienced a communication style difference or a personality mismatch. This mentor had a hard time getting one of her mentees to open up and talk.

Participant 1 stated:

I have two (mentees) who are really open and who do not mind talking about whatever, where there is another mentee who is really hard to open up and crack the shell. She tends to go along with what everyone else says.

Participant 1 felt it took hard work to get the mentee to talk. It was hard for this mentor to build a relationship when the mentee did not want to talk.

Another communication problem that came up for three of the participants was a lack of communication or inconsistent communication. The mentors tried to communicate with the mentees on a regular basis and expected regular communication from the mentee. Participant 4 reported "...I expected to have a regular communication with my mentee, like maybe once a week. A little more structured, but it wasn't like that..." Participant 3 talked about the mentees being inconsistent with communication. Participant 2 stated "Towards the end of the peer mentoring pilot year communication started to decrease. ...I was not getting as much communication as I would like..." The lack of communication caused the mentoring relationships to appear to be a one-way relationship at times.

Conflicts in schedules was a common obstacle for all participants, and this created a challenge when trying to establish a relationship.

The mentors and mentees had difficulty finding time for meetings or attending scheduled group meetings. Everyone's schedule had to be taken into account when scheduling meetings.

Participant 4 explained:

I know that some of the mentors had a hard time contacting and getting together with their mentee further along in the semester because people got busier. The mentors got busier and the mentees got busier.

Some of the meetings the mentors had with the mentees were on an individual basis because the mentees or mentor could not make the group meeting.

Participant 1 stated, "...I saw them more on an individual basis because everyone's schedule was really different and we couldn't meet up at once, so I would say once a month either as a group or individually." Scheduling conflicts can make a difference in being able to establish a mentoring relationship.

When the mentors were communicating with the mentees, the mentors had to understand what was appropriate to talk about and what was not. The mentors had training on setting boundaries with their mentees. Two of the participants talked about experiences with mentees where they had to make sure they were overstepping their boundaries. Participant 1 stated:

It's just knowing the fine line between the personal aspect and the more professional. As a mentor, I do have mentees come up and ask me questions about their own personal life, but if I feel like it is crossing a certain border, I should not touch upon then. I will redirect them and tell them if they really need help I recommend you go to this person, as opposed to trying to take it on myself, which is something I normally would have done but with a title as a mentor, I have to know exactly where those boundaries are.

The mentors had to establish a professional relationship with the mentees and make sure they did not cross into a personal relationship.

Two of the participants stated they were resources to their mentee.

Participant 2 let the mentees know they were there as a resource:

I mean most of the role we played was just being a resource if they needed something. We (the mentors) made it clear that we were available to them and did chime in every once in a while to see if they were ok. For the most part, we let them know we were a resource for them to use.

Participant 1 had the opportunity to help the mentee through a process of declaring a major:

I know one of the occupational therapy majors now, was undeclared before. He did not know exactly what the process was to get occupational therapy as his major so I told him here is the paperwork I gave him everything and all the resources he could use. I said e-mail this person or call them on their direct line.

Participant 1 was able to be a resource and provide the mentee information on the process of declaring a major.

Emotions and Most Valuable Experience when Mentoring

Each participant had a unique emotional experience. The participants expressed emotions they felt when they were mentoring and talked about their most valuable experience as a mentor.

Participant 1 talked about the experience of being a mentor:

It was really exciting at first and a little nerve racking actually because I was not sure if I would have mentees who were very open like I am. ...I felt really successful doing this (mentoring) and I felt happy knowing they (the mentees) could get the help they needed.

... I think the most valuable (experience) was actually teaching people, and knowing that what you're teaching them is helping them in the long run.

Participant 2 stated the overall experience of being a mentor was good.

This participant had the expectation of getting "the confirmation that I did make a difference in their college experience and I was able to see growth in them as a person transitioning from high school to college." The most valuable experience for Participant 2 was "...seeing that they (the mentees) were successful in what they did and were satisfied with the decisions that they made, especially the ones that I helped them with. I think that was the most important part, and knowing I put them into the right direction."

Participant 3 explained her most valuable experience was connecting with her mentees. "...it was nice to listen to what they were kind of going through what I went through. I was able to tell them that hey I went through it, you are not alone."

Participant 4 reported her overall experience was great. This participant had one experience where she felt disappointed and hurt. There was an expectation of the mentees to be more excited about the mentoring program and relationship.

"I tried to let them (mentees) know I was there if they needed me...at the beginning it was weird. I felt like my feelings were hurt because I felt both of my mentees blew me off..."

Participant 4 talked about her most valuable experience:

The most valuable experience for me is just knowing that I somehow made some kind of impact in someone's life. If it was just one person, one mentee that I worked with then I'm happy and I think this was worth it, but I won't forget this one thing that my mentee told me a couple months ago. She started crying and said "you are like the older cousin I never had, to tell me what's good or what's bad and kind of guide me to what I need to do and have someone answer questions. I cannot talk to my parents about this because they do not know." ... I just think knowing that I made some kind of difference in someone's life and I hope that I believe in paying it forward, I hope that they (the mentee) will be able to go out and help someone and be able to be a mentor as well.

Application of Skills to Future Career

Three of the participants identified how mentoring will help them in their future careers and how the skills they developed will carry over to their future career. Three participants identified the application of skills to future career.

Participant 1 gave an example of how skills developed during mentoring will be utilized after graduation. "As far as time management as an occupational therapist, if you have initial evaluations or you are double booked, you really have to know how you are running your treatment sessions so that you have time to see each patient and give them good quality of care."

Participant 2 talked about leadership in the workforce:

We (the mentors) can take that same skill set and apply it in the workforce and we can learn to be more resourceful and take a leadership role for people that may need some help that we are working with like coworkers for example.

It is going to be the same thing when we move up the corporate ladder or advance in whatever position we are in. We are going to have people that are working underneath us that are new just like first generation college students and they are going to need guidance and support. It's going to be like the same principles just a different context.

Participant 4 also talked about leadership skills:

I think that being part of a program or even being a part of our program would be a good opportunity for the mentors to develop their communication skills and to develop their professional skills. Being involved in programs such as this one, allows the mentors to grow and develop as a person. I think it allows them the opportunity to again learn about themselves and apply it to their future and their profession, and these are skills that they will be able to transition into any other area that they go into. Once you are a leader you can pretty much take on a leadership role anywhere you go, I think that is something I will carry with me and I would like eventually to hold some more leadership roles within my profession once I decide where I am going work.

Discussion

Each element of PEO was analyzed to better understand the mentor's performance.

The P includes every aspect of the person. During the interviews, the participants talked about skills they developed such as time management, listening, and interpersonal communication. These findings were consistent with the research done by Harmon (2006). Harmon (2006) found the mentors developed skills in time management and communication. The participants had to manage their own schedule and figure out when they could meet with their mentees. Participants reported a development in communication, which includes listening and interpersonal communication. The participants became more aware of their communication style and tried to keep the communication professional. One of the skills a participant mentioned that was not in the research was emotional self-regulation. The skill of self-regulation was learned when the participant had to adjust his/her style (communication, level of energy) to match the mentee to try to get the mentee to open up.

Another aspect of the P were skills mentioned by individual participants such as patience, leadership, maturity, responsibility, self-awareness, and being a resource. Participants learned they had specific skills when they were mentoring. Harmon (2006) stated in his research that mentors learn about themselves when they are mentoring. The participants learned about themselves as they were mentoring. It gave the mentors a better understanding of how they will handle themselves when they get a job.

Emotions and “the most valuable experience” were also a part of the P. The mentors had a range of feelings when they were building the mentoring relationship: such as excitement, happiness, satisfaction, and disappointment.

The participants stated they would always remember the emotions they felt during the mentoring experience. They could remember how they felt and how they dealt with their emotions in each situation.

The participants will be able to use their experiences with their mentees to help them with future situations when they are working if they are mentoring someone such as a new coworker or a student doing their internship. Participants will always carry with them their experience of being a mentor. The experience they had as a mentor may influence them in their future pursuits. These participants may seek out opportunities to be mentors at their jobs or in the community.

The environment for this research was the program, the mentee, and the mentor-mentee relationship. One of the themes that emerged in all the interviews was the structure of the program. The participants all expected more facilitation. Participants wanted more training and more meetings to improve the mentoring experience. The structure of the program may have affected occupational performance for the participants. The fit between the P-E was not the best fit and because of the P-E fit, the participants had fewer opportunities to mentor; therefore, affecting the E-O relationship thus reducing the occupational performance. In one case, there was a personality mismatch between the mentor and mentee. The fit between the P-E was not very good and this affected the O-E.

The participant had a harder time mentoring the mentee because of the poor P-E, O-E fit the occupational performance was reduced. Occupational performance can be increased by improving the fit between the P-E.

One way to improve the fit is to match the mentor and mentee by their major. The mentor will already have an understanding of what the mentee will be going through and the mentor will be a good resource for the mentee.

The occupation in this research was the peer mentoring process. Some of the meetings were one on one and others were group meetings. The frequency of the meetings varied from once a month to more often.

The interaction of the P-O, O-E, P-E, and P-E-O determined the occupational performance. Development and application of skills that will transfer to future career and mentoring was the occupational performance for this research. As the participants were providing mentoring, they developed skills that will carry over into their careers. According to Schoeff (2007), college graduates entering the workforce frequently have deficits in communication, interpersonal skills, time management, and adaptability. Some of the skills the participants talked about developing were communication and time management. The participants also talked about how the skills they developed will apply to their future careers. Participants also had to be adaptable when scheduling meetings with mentors. These participants were able to help their mentees and develop skills they will need in the workforce, helping them be better prepared to succeed at school and work.

Figure 2: Results Applied to PEO Model

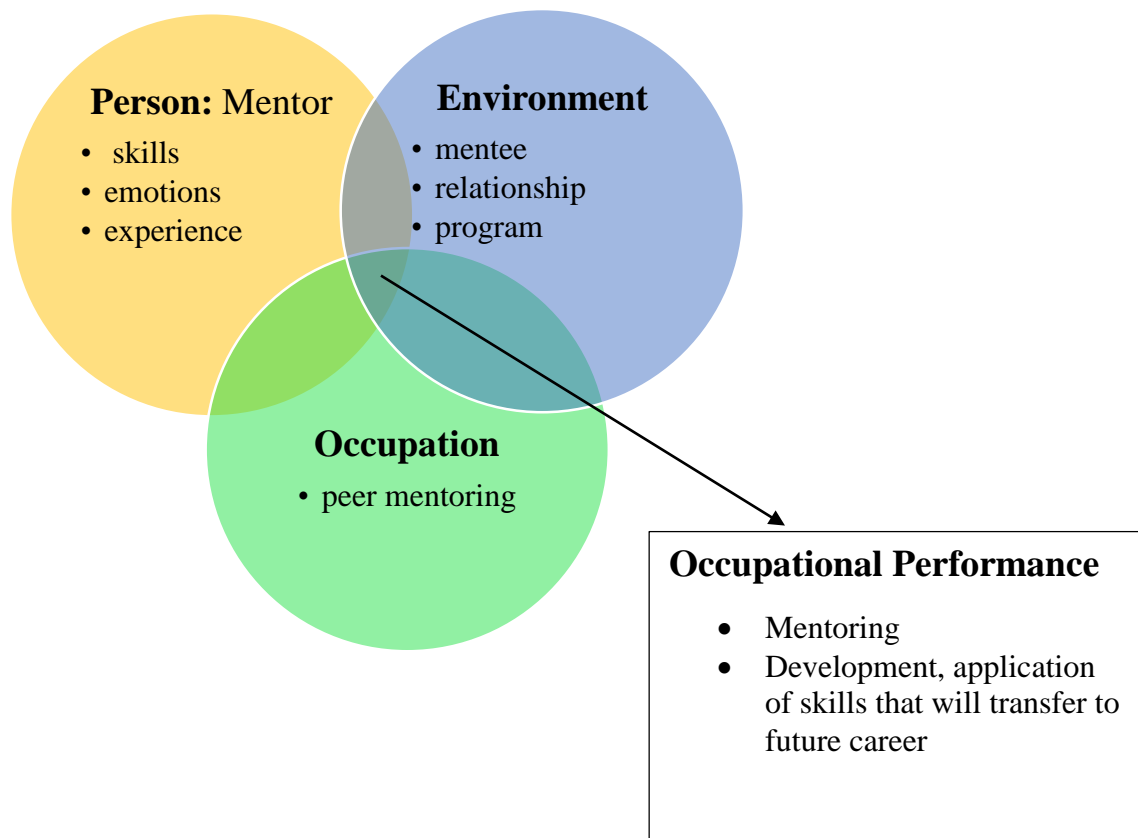


Figure 2 is the results applied to the PEO model.

Limitations

Participants in this study came from a small university in Northern California and results may not transfer to other mentoring programs at larger universities. There was also a small number of participants (four) and the researchers were novices. In addition, because Dominican University of California has 39% ALANA students, experiences reported by the participants may not transfer to other universities with a smaller percentage of ALANA students. The participants may not have wanted to share with the researchers because they may not have been sure what the information was to be used for. To address the problem the researchers clearly explained the research to the participants and ensured participants that once data were collected there would be no identification of names.

Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendations

FGS encounter many challenges from high school to college and college to career, which may determine their success in the future. Peer mentoring can decrease or prevent negative outcomes from these challenges. Both mentees and mentors gain benefits in a peer-mentoring program, but little is known about the experiences of the peer mentors. A qualitative, exploratory design was used for this study to gain a better understanding about the experiences of FGS peer mentors from the Bridging the Gap for First-Generation College students mentoring program at Dominican University of California. Interviews were conducted to understand the experiences of the participants, the importance of participating, the skills they developed, and the difficulties they encountered with certain structural aspects of the program.

The PEO model helped us understand the occupational performance of the peer mentors by examining the interaction between the experiences of the peer mentor (person), their environmental supports (environment), and the demands of mentoring (occupation).

From this study, we discovered that the participants developed skills such as time management and communication that can carry over to their future professions. We also discovered that participants' wanted more structure and social interaction in the program. Participants described a relationship that evolved between the mentor and the mentee, emotions mentors experienced, and cited experiences gained from mentoring. Application of skills to career emerged when the mentors began to see a transition from student to novice professional.

Based on comments received from participants of this study, improvements to the program at Dominican University of California should be made to provide students with a more structured and effective program. Another study conducted after improvements made on this program could provide further information about the effectiveness of the mentoring program and skill development of the participants. For future studies, it is recommended that this study be replicated at a larger university. To understand the long-term benefits of mentoring, a longitudinal study could provide further information on skill development of mentees and to investigate whether the skills developed transferred over to their profession. The transition from college to career is a challenging journey for many FGS and studies that can further understand what mentoring could do for mentors could assist in the transition and application of skills to the careers of mentors.

This study provided an understanding of the participants' experiences and how mentoring may affect the participants' future careers.

By investigating the experiences of peer mentors and the benefits and skills attained from mentoring, occupational therapists can gain a deeper understanding of the peer mentors' experience and create peer-mentoring programs that will help improve the occupational performance.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

1.) Why are you participating in mentoring program?

2.) What are some reasons for wanting to mentor?

Probe:

- Personal satisfaction
- Increased self-awareness
- Helping others

3.) What skills have you developed? How do you think these skills will help you in the future?

Probe:

- What skills can you use for the rest of your time at Dominican?
- What skills will be useful for life after Dominican?
- Are there any skills that you think would be helpful to develop for life after Dominican?

4.) What are your experiences being a mentor?

Probe:

- What is the most valuable experience?
- What were you expecting out of the mentoring experience?
- Did it meet your expectations?
- What are your expectations for the rest of your experience?
- What have you learned about yourself from being a mentor?

Other Probes to use:

- Can you give me an example of that?
- Can you tell me a time when...?
- Can you give me an example of what you have learned?
- How do you think you have grown?
- How did you use those skills?
- Can you give me an example of how you used that skill?
- Do you feel comfortable telling me about one of those challenges?
- What are the things that got you through those challenges?

Appendix B: IRB Letter of Approval

February 27, 2013

Dear Tiffany:

I have reviewed your proposal (entitled, A Qualitative Study of the Experiences of First-Generation Peer Mentors) submitted to the Dominican University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS Application, #10114). I am approving it as having met the requirements for expedited review.

In your final report or paper, please indicate that your project was approved by the IRBPHS and indicate the identification number.

I wish you well in your very interesting research effort.

Sincerely,
Martha Nelson, Ph.D.
Chair, IRBPHS

Appendix C: Consent Form

DOMINICAN UNIVERSITY of CALIFORNIA CONSENT TO BE A RESEARCH SUBJECT

Purpose and Background:

Ms. Cindelle Leyson, Ms. Jessica Taylor, and Ms. Tiffany Torres, graduate students in the Department of Occupational Therapy at Dominican University of California, are conducting a research study designed to look the experience of first-generation mentors. The researchers are interested in the benefits of mentoring for the mentors.

I am being asked to participate because I am a mentor in the Bridging the Gap for First-Generation College Students at Dominican University of California.

Procedures:

If I agree to be a participant in this study, the following will happen:

1.) Interviews will individually ask the participants questions about their reasons for mentoring, experience with the mentoring program, skills developed as a mentor, and how mentoring has influenced their occupational areas (see attached interview guide). Interviews will take place at a location convenient to the participant, will last 45 to 60 minutes and will be audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

Risks and/or Discomforts:

I understand that my participation involves no physical risk, but may involve minor psychological discomfort. I may elect to stop the interview and or focus group at any time and may refuse to participate before or after the study is started without any adverse effects.

Benefits:

Participants may learn more about themselves as well as the experiences of other participants by participating in this study. Participants will be contributing to the little research known about the benefits of being a peer mentor.

Questions:

I have talked to Ms. Leyson, Ms. Taylor, or Ms. Torres, about this study and have had my questions answered. If I have further questions about the study, I may contact Ms. Torres at tiffany.torres@students.dominican.edu or her research supervisor, Stacy Frauwirth MS, OTR/L Assistant Professor, Department of Occupational Dominican University of California at (415) 257-1380. If I have any questions or comments about participation in this study, I should talk first with the researcher and the research supervisor.

If for some reason I do not wish to do this, I may contact the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS), which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. I may reach the IRBPHS Office by calling (415) 257-1389 and leaving a voicemail message, by FAX at (415) 257-0165 or by writing to the IRBPHS, Office of the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, Dominican University of California, 50 Acacia Avenue, San Rafael, CA 94901.

Consent:

I have been given a copy of this consent form, signed and dated, to keep.

PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. I am free to decline to be in this study or withdraw my participation at any time without fear of adverse consequences.

My signature below indicates that I agree to participate in this study.

SUBJECT'S SIGNATURE

DATE

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCHER

DATE